

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 261

CS 204 939

AUTHOR Fisher, Carol J.; Natarella, Margaret A.
 TITLE Poetry Preferences of Primary Graders. Studies in Language Education, Report No. 35.
 INSTITUTION Georgia Univ., Athens. Dept. of Language Education.
 PUB DATE May 79
 NOTE 16p.
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Educational Research; English Instruction; Listening Comprehension; Listening Habits; *Literature Appreciation; *Poetry; Primary Education; Reading Interests; Student Attitudes; Student Development; Student Interests; *Student Reaction

ABSTRACT

Fifteen classes of first, second, and third grade students in five Clarke County, Georgia, schools listened to poems and rated them on a three-point scale. Five of these 15 classes also participated in the study's second phase, which measured responses to the same poems after some poetry and related extension activities. Analysis revealed that the most popular poems were narrative, contained humor, did not depend on word play, and were either about children, involved children in the subject situation, or were about animals. The children also showed an overwhelming preference for rhymed, metered poetry. Surprisingly few poems were more or less well liked after student participation in the poetry-related activities of phase two. In an attitude survey, children from poetry study classes showed greater interest in writing and in acting out poems, while children who had not participated in poetry study expressed interest in learning to recite poetry. These results add to data from a similar study of intermediate-grade students, and suggest that teachers should carefully select a variety of poems that extend children's taste while maintaining their positive attitudes toward poetry. (RL)

 * Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
 * from the original document. *

ED172261

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

POETRY PREFERENCES OF
PRIMARY GRADERS

by

Carol J. Fisher
University of Georgia

and

Margaret A. Natarella
Columbia Public Schools
Columbia, Missouri

Studies in Language Education, Report No. 35
Department of Language Education, The University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia
May 1979

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Carol J. Fisher
Margaret A. Natarella

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

C5204939

Although primary grade children encounter poetry in the nursery rhymes they hear, in poems with finger plays, and in their reading books, there is little information about what kinds of poetry children of this age prefer. Terry's study of upper elementary grade children (1974) looked at fourth, fifth, and sixth graders, and found that within these grades there was a decline in interest in poetry with increasing age although there was little change in the kinds of poems the children liked. The present study was designed to examine first through third graders' interest in poetry, the forms, poetic elements, and topics they like as well as any preference for traditional or modern poetry.

Description of the Study

Fifteen classes located in five schools in Clarke County, Georgia listened to poems representing the categories being examined that were recorded on cassette tapes, and then they marked how well they liked each. The children, in their first, second or third year in school, heard seven poems each day for eight days. They responded by circling a star if they thought the poem was really great, by circling the letters O.K. if they liked it all right, and by circling NO if they did not like the poem. Only eight of the over three-hundred-fifty booklets had to be discarded because of errors in marking.

A second phase of the study involved five classes of the original fifteen who used some poetry and related extension activities to

familiarize the children with more modern unrhymed verse. The activities included such things as related art projects, movement to the poem, discussion and dramatization of poetry, and musical and rhythmic accompaniments as well as some experiences in creating their own simple poems or poetic descriptions. After completing at least eighteen or more of the twenty-four lessons provided by the investigators, the children were re-tested using the same poetry tapes; and a brief attitude toward poetry survey was given to second and third year students who had been exposed to the lessons and another second and third year class who had not.

The poems selected for the survey represented different forms of poetry (narrative, verse, limerick, haiku, free verse, and lyric), different poetic elements featured (rhyme, meter, metaphorical language, and alliteration and onomatopoeia), poems that were traditional and those with modern themes as content, and poems that represented various topics (animals, other children, familiar experiences, and nature). The arrangement of the various forms of poems was different each day to eliminate the possibility of order affecting the children's preferences.

To obtain a numerical rating for each poem, the star was assigned two points, the O.K. one point, and the NO was scored zero points. This was done to account for the greater preference shown for the star poems.

Findings of the Study--Main Survey.

These children liked the poems they heard; seventy-six percent of their responses were either that they liked the poem all right or that

they thought it was great and deserved a star. This attitude was supported by informal talks with the teachers who indicated that the children looked forward to listening to the poems and would ask to hear their favorites over again. In spite of the generally favorable response, there was a considerable range of ratings for the poems, from 269 to 614 with a mean score of 406.

Table 1. The ten most popular poems.

<u>RANK</u>	<u>TITLE</u>	<u>RATING</u>
1st	THE LITTLE TURTLE (Lindsay)	614
2nd	BAD BOY (Lanski)	585
3rd	THE ADVENTURES OF ISABEL (Nash)	566
4th	THE OWL AND THE FUSSY-CAT (Lear)	550
5th	BIRD TALK (Fisher)	540
6th	MUMMY SLEPT LATE AND DADDY FIXED BREAKFAST (Ciardi)	517
7th	THE FISH WITH THE DEEP SEA SMILE (Brown)	503
8th	EAT-IT-ALL ELAINE (Starbird)	502
9th	BROTHER (Hoberman)	491
10th	THE MEAL } tied (Kuskin)	

Table 2. The ten least popular poems.

<u>RANK</u>	<u>TITLE</u>	<u>RATING</u>
56th	I STARE AT THE RAIN (Caudill)	269
55th	POINT OF VIEW (McCord)	285
54th	JETLINER (Korlyama)	292
53rd	BUTTONS (Hillert)	298
52nd	THROUGH THE AUTOMATIC CARWASH (Vas Dias)	308
51st	WHO HAS SEEN THE WIND (Rossetti)	314
50th	SNOWY MORNING (Moore)	320
49th	FOGHORNS (Moore)	325
48th	SHELLS (Moore)	333
47th	PASSING BY THE JUNKYARD (Egita) } tied	

When the poems were analyzed for form, poetic elements, type, and content, there were certain obvious preferences shown. These revealed some of the patterns that would have been expected from reading interest

studies and from the poetry Terry's older children liked. Some preferences are unique to the younger children.

Poetic Forms. The most popular form of poem surveyed was the narrative. Eight of the ten children's favorites were narratives, while only one of the least popular poems was written in narrative form. The children disliked free verse, lyric poetry, and haiku; in fact, six of the ten least liked poems are written in free verse. The poems that the children liked were long in comparison to the ones they did not like. This may be a factor related to the form or, perhaps, part of listening to poems. Terry's subjects often commented that they did not like a particular poem because it was 'too short'. Her older children did not like free verse, lyric poetry or haiku either.

The older children in the Terry study did like limericks, but the younger children surveyed here did not. All of the limericks scored below the mean, perhaps because limericks which depend upon a certain sophistication with words may not be understood or appreciated by the younger children. In general, poetry that depended in some way on word play was not popular with primary graders.

Poetic Elements. The children showed an overwhelming preference for rhymed, metered poetry. Of the ten favorites, all are rhymed and only one does not have a strong, persistent meter. Seven of the least popular poems did not rhyme; only three were rhymed, metered forms.

One of the poetic elements represented was the extensive use of metaphorical language. The poetry was carefully chosen to include metaphors that the children would understand: in "Shells," the shells are the "magic bones of the sea"; "Through the Automatic Carwash" compares that experience to moving through a thundershower; and in "Buttons" the dandelions fasten down the grass and the stars button up the sky at night. In "Passing by the Junkyard" personification is important and wheels and fanbelts smile, and in "Jetliner" the jet "slowly begins to jog" and then "dashes like mad" to shake off the earth's pull. Nevertheless, none of the favorite poems featured metaphors, while eight of the least liked poems were quite dependent on metaphorical language. The most popular poem that emphasized metaphor was number 20 of 56, "Steam Shovel," in which the machine is compared to a dinosaur stretching his neck and chewing and grinning.

When sound was used as a main element, the children's responses were generally positive; all of the poems containing devices such as alliteration or onomatopoeia were among the top half, and two were among the ten most popular. In "Brother" there is a "bother of a brother" who is taken to mother for "another little brother for a change;" and in "The Meal," "Timothy Tompkins had turnips and tea. The turnips were tiny. He ate at least three."

Like the older children in the Terry study, these children liked rhymed poetry; all of the top twenty-five poems of the fourth-sixth graders were rhymed, and all of the top ten poems of the

primary graders were also. Elements of sound were popular with both age groups, although sound may not be quite as well liked by the younger group. Both studies found that poems which depended upon metaphorical language were not well liked. This may be because they did not understand such use of language, and some of the comments by the children in both studies show this. One of the younger children in discussing "I Stare at the Rain" said, "Rain can't stare at you; the rain don't have eyes." Or it may be that poetry which is so dependent on figurative language is usually descriptive rather than narrative. Further, the topics of such poems are often not those that are children's favorites; this may account for the relatively high rating given "Steam Shovel: since dinosaura are often popular animal subjects of children.

Traditional and Modern Poetry. The five poems that were considered traditional were "The Little Turtle" by Rachel Lindsay, "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" by Edward Lear, "The Quiet Child" by Rachel Field, "Bed in Summer" by Robert Louis Stephenson, and "Who Has Seen the Wind?" by Christina Rossetti. The children's reactions to these were mixed; of the fifty-six poems surveyed, they ranked 1st, 4th, 11th, 31st, and 51st respectively. The poems representing modern themes or topics were also mixed. "Bad Boy" by Lois Lenski was 2nd, "Ice Cream" by Lynn Mead was 12th, "Passing by the Junkyard" by Charles J. Egitas was 48th, "Through the Automatic Carwash" by Robert Vas Dias was 52nd, and "Jetliner" by Naoshi Korlana was 54th. It is

worth noting that the two modern poems that also contained modern language were the most popular with the children, which may suggest a positive response to contemporary language or expressions in poetry.

These findings reflect distinct differences with those of the older children in the Terry study. No traditional poems were included in the fourth, fifth, or sixth graders' twenty-five most popular poems, but three of the five traditional poems surveyed in this study were well liked. It appears that for the younger children, other factors such as topic or familiarity with the poem are more important than with the older children.

The Content of the Poem. The topic of the poems seem to be very influential in children's choices. Six of the ten most popular poems were either about children or involved children in the situation, and the other four most popular were about animals, a favorite topic of youngsters. Of the ten least popular poems, none were about children or their activities and only one was about animals. Five of the least popular poems were about nature: "I Stare at the Rain," "Who Has Seen the Wind?" "Snowy Morning," "Foghorns," and "Shells." The topic seems to be a particularly important aspect of poems for the younger children for, in spite of the fact that they generally disliked free verse, two ranked fairly high: the twelfth most popular poem was "Ice Cream" surely a favorite topic of youngsters, and "Steam Shovel" which compared that machine to a dinosaur, was twentieth. In discussing why they liked "Ice

Cream," one child expressed it perfectly, "When you hear the poem's called "Ice Cream," you like it; when you hear the poem, you don't."

An important part of the content of poetry for children is humor. Nine of the most popular poems were clearly humorous, and "Bad Boy" was considered funny by many of them. Their comments about why they liked or didn't like this poem frequently mention humor: "It's real funny." "I liked it because it was so funny." "He talks funny." or the prize comment, "I think it's funny, but they ain't saying it right." Humor may be the key to the children's responses to traditional verse. The three traditional poems that they liked were all humorous poems: "The Little Turtle," "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat," and "The Quiet Child" which may appeal to the same sense of humor in children as "Bad Boy," for while the grownups think she is a quiet child in bed, each night she turns into a wild, bad witch and flies all over the countryside. The same thing is true of the modern poems; the two which ranked high, "Bad Boy" and "Ice Cream" were clearly humorous, while the three that were not popular were not humorous.

Findings of the Study--Preferences after Poetry Lessons.

After the children had participated in 18 or more of the 24 lessons provided to the teachers participating in this phase of the study, they were re-tested to determine if there were any changes in their preferences after more contact with poetry, especially unrhymed verse. A chi square analysis examined whether or not there were significant shifts in the marks given each poem, and t-tests

examined whether or not there were significant changes in their preferences since the chi square analysis does not give additional weight to the star responses. Only poems with significant chi square and t-test results are reported.

Table 3. Significant Increases in Preference after Lessons

<u>RANK</u>	<u>TITLE</u>	<u>t sig</u>	<u>χ^2 sig</u>
7th	The Fish with the Deep Sea Smile	.035	.003
8th	Eat-It-All Elaine	.0003	.0002
15th	Four Things to Note About a Goat	.008	.013

Table 4. Significant Decreases in Preference after Lessons

<u>RANK</u>	<u>TITLE</u>	<u>t sig</u>	<u>χ^2 sig</u>
25th	Limerick: Old Man with a Beard	.0004	.0002
40th	Color	.004	.004
43rd	Snow	.001	.017
47th	Shells	.001	.006
48th	Passing by the Junkyard	.027	.054
50th	Snowy Morning	.0007	.0005

Surprisingly few poems were more or less well-liked after the poetry experiences. All three poems in which there were significant increases in preference were highly ranked poems in the original survey. The poems which decreased in preference after the lessons were all poems that were originally ranked quite low. The children's preferences persisted or, in a few cases, intensified in the post-testing. Although the teachers reported that the children enjoyed the lessons and that they now planned to do more with poetry in the future, one must be cautious about how much impact eighteen lessons can be expected to have on children who are exposed to so much rhymed verse both in and

out of school.

Findings of the Study--Attitude Survey.

One second grade class and one third grade class who had had the poetry lessons and a class at each grade level at the same school who had not used them were surveyed for attitude toward poetry and poetry related activities after the post-testing period was over. This was done by using a paper and pencil response sheet where the words which the children circled to give their answer were cued by an illustration at the top of each column. These illustrations and the matching words were introduced by the investigator on large cards before the children were given their answer sheets. They were instructed to listen to each statement and then circle the words that best told how they felt. The three possible responses were: (1.) Yes! Yes!, (2.) Sometimes, and (3.) No. There were 49 children who had had the lessons and 51 who had not. Results of this survey are given in Table 5.

Table 5. Survey of Attitude toward Poetry, Chi Square Analysis.

<u>SURVEY QUESTION</u>	<u>χ^2</u>	<u>SIGNIFICANCE</u>
1. I like poetry	3.63	N.S.
2. I like to listen to poetry being read	1.67	N.S.
3. I like to read poetry by myself	1.24	N.S.
4. I like to write poetry	6.70	.05
5. I like to listen to poetry as well as stories	2.94	N.S.
6. I like to act out poems	6.64	.05
7. I like to do art activities that go with poems	4.05	N.S.
8. I would like to have records or tapes of poems in our room to listen to	.50	N.S.
9. I like to read poems together with other kids	.61	N.S.
10. I'd like to learn to say a poem by myself	66.63	.05

2 df $\chi^2 = 5.99$ (.05 level of confidence)

Children who had had the extending experiences with poetry gave signifi-

stantly more positive responses to No. 4: "I like to write poetry" and to No. 6: "I like to act out poems." Item No. 10: "I'd like to learn to say a poem by myself" got more positive responses from the children who had not had the special experiences. Again all of the children were generally positive toward the poetry and related activities as Table 6 shows.

Table 6. Summary of Responses of Both Groups to Survey Instrument. (N = 100)

<u>SURVEY QUESTION</u>	<u>YES!</u>	<u>YES!</u>	<u>SOMETIMES</u>	<u>NO</u>
1. I like poetry	43		51	6
2. I like to listen to poetry being read	54		38	8
3. I like to read poetry by myself	44		41	15
4. I like to write poetry	44		33	23
5. I like to listen to poetry as well as to stories	39		39	22
6. I like to act out poems	59		25	16
7. I like to do art activities that to with poems	58		28	14
8. I would like to have records or tapes of poems in our room to listen to	69		22	9
9. I like to read poems together with other kids	33		48	19
10. I'd like to learn to say a poem by myself	66		24	10

The two items about which the children who had had the poetry lessons were more positive may relate to their experiences in these lessons since the children did have opportunities to write some simple poems or verses, and there were also many opportunities to act out poems, doing related movement and simple dramatic activities. It is interesting to speculate why the children without the lessons were so much more interested in learning to say a poem by themselves.

Perhaps the children with more poetry experiences were more knowledgeable about what would be involved in memorizing a poem than the less experienced group, or perhaps the children in that group had some experiences outside the study that affected this response.

Implications and Interpretation.

When drawing implications from this study, or from Terry's study of older children, it is important to consider the fact that the children were listening to poetry, not reading it. Since one of the qualities of poetry is compression, it may be more difficult to appreciate certain kinds of poems when you hear rather than see them. The children's preference for longer poems, for humorous narrative poetry rather than free verse or haiku may be largely an effect of listening. Listening may also interfere with an understanding or appreciation of the more subtle aspects of poetry such as metaphorical language, while the more obvious elements such as rhyme and meter are highlighted. Some poems may require re-reading and time to internalize or note their fine points. "Point of View" may be just such a poem for younger children. It tells about the bat and the possum who hang upside down and have to frown to show a smile. Although this poem is about animals, a favorite subject, and is rhymed and metered, the children did not like it very well. Perhaps this is because it requires some time to figure out and the ability to handle reversibility. Listening to poems instead of reading them may affect the kinds of preferences reported.

Although we have reported the most and least well-liked poems and have discussed what children like or do not like in poetry, every single poem in this study had some children who thought it was great--that it deserved a star rating. The least popular poem, the haiku "I stare at the rain," was rated a star by 73 children, an O.K. by 123 children, and marked NO by 155 children. By way of contrast, the most popular poem "The Little Turtle" was marked NO by 21 children, an O.K. by 66 children, and rated a star by 274 children. While information about what children like and dislike may be helpful as a guide in selecting poems for children to listen to or to read, none should be eliminated because it was in the least popular group or because it is a form that does not usually elicit positive responses. To meet children's varied preferences, we must use a wide selection of poems.

There is some evidence that children like the poems that they have heard before. If so, listening to some of the less popular forms may make them more popular. Most of the poetry that young children encounter is rhymed verse, nursery rhymes, finger plays, and jingles or chants. This may be an important factor in their preference for rhymed poetry throughout the elementary grades. If we wish to extend their preferences, perhaps they should hear more unrhymed poetry, not less.

Although the results of activities that may enhance children's responses to poetry did not change the direction of their preferences, there were some indications that activities like dramatizing or moving

to poetry, discussing or doing creative choral readings or reading poems with rhythmic accompaniments, responding in other creative media such as music or art, and writing poetry did affect children's attitudes favorably toward writing poetry themselves and dramatizing it. These activities done over an extended period of time may well enhance children's attitudes toward poetry; and familiarity with more varied types of poems may extend their range of well-liked poems.

Since the focus for selecting poems is two-fold--extending children's taste and maintaining a positive attitude toward poetry--teachers and publishers should be clear about their purpose for each choice. We do not want to "turn off" children by too many poems that are not apt to be popular, and yet we need to expand the range of poems with which they are familiar.

References

- Terry, C. Ann. Children's Poetry Preferences: A National Survey of Upper Elementary Grades (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English) Research Report No. 16, 1974.